

Science and Justice in an Age of Populism and Denial

An interesting feature of the 2020 COVID pandemic so far¹ has been how a large proportion of the population of democratic societies have been more or less willing to accept sometimes quite severe restrictions of their liberty and substantial hits to GDP. It is almost as if millions and millions of people actually do think that their health and wellbeing, and that of their family, friends, and of wider society, is more important than maximising economic activity and the space for libertarian consumption². This has not been the case universally, of course. Still, although there have been plenty of cases of apparent government indifference, incoherence and competence-bypass, democratic populations have tended to support government claims to be ‘following the science’ and the health care institutions charged with delivering the results of that science. It seems a good time to ask whether there might be similar mass support for environmental measures that, whilst not amounting to a ‘full lockdown’, might follow the relevant sciences in bringing about a more ecologically rational and just ‘new normal’. This question brings many further questions in its wake, some of which are considered by the papers in this issue of *Environmental Values*³.

In the first paper William Davies considers how the current ecological moment might allow a ‘green populism’, very different to that of a Trump or Bolsonaro (Davies 2020). He draws upon the work of Hannah Arendt, ‘for whom the tension between science and politics is central to the identity of both’ (p.x), to sketch a ‘populism for the Anthropocene’ that strips science of its ‘unworldliness’, bringing it within the realm of politics. On this view, the Cartesian rationalism Weber associated with the ‘vocation’ of modern science (the ‘value-free’ search for disembodied, timeless laws governing a nature devoid of ethical significance and held to be ontologically distinct from humanity) involves a retreat from politics as a realm where actors are only too aware of their finitude and mortality (legendary deeds being the only route to anything like immortality). Grippled by a vocational commitment to objectivity and value freedom, scientists *qua scientists* are oddly oblivious to the consequences of their endeavours, blind to the value of the preconditions of human life (and so of the scientific enterprise itself), and silent on political questions regarding the organisation, governance and funding of science. The (self-)image of modern science as

¹ This was written in August 2020.

² See Spash (2020) for a discussion of how the pandemic has further exposed the structural irrationalities and injustices of ‘economic systems dominated by a capital accumulating growth imperative’ that have long been criticised in terms of their limits, ‘consumerist values and divorce from biophysical realities’.

³ All of which were submitted, reviewed and accepted prior to the 2020 pandemic.

‘pure’ apolitical pursuit of objective truth has received severe blows from genealogical and social studies of science. Work has also been done on the psychological difficulties of holding onto the Weberian ideal qua scientist in fields like climate science where findings are particularly alarming from most value perspectives⁴. The question now is how to reconceptualise science to engage with the political and ethical issues wrapped up in the ecological crisis⁵. Although Arendt could hardly be described as a populist, Davies shows that her critique of unworldly modern science chimes with key elements of populism.

Central to populism is a picture of ‘the people’ whose ‘general will’ is thwarted by a corrupt elite. Both sides of this distinction tend to be homogenised. Differences amongst the people are downplayed or ignored, precisely to produce a picture of a mass with something like a general will. Differences between apparently distinct centres of power and authority (including political parties, the media, senior civil servants, universities, the judiciary and business leaders) are erased to produce a picture of a minority elite cultural group of decision makers all ‘in it together’ in thwarting the people, behind the smokescreen afforded by liberal democratic institutions⁶. Important here is populist critique of the pretence to *representation* (only direct democracy topped off by charismatic leadership can genuinely articulate the will of the people), including elite expert representation of the ‘objective facts’. Here is where the populist picture tends to coincide with the critique of an ‘unworldly’ science. In reality, as part of the elite it interprets and presents the facts in ways serving the interests of that elite⁷. For Davies, this chimes with an important Arendtian insight: perception of hypocrisy has often been a more potent mobiliser of political action (of transforming *engages* into *enrages*) than perception of injustice. However, he suggests that with some modification of the scientific vocation another form of populism is possible, one deeply informed by the science and focussed on environmental problems. Signs of this have already been seen in the development of movements such as Extinction Rebellion and Rising Tide.

One area of science that seems to avoid the problem of unworldliness is medical science, Davies argues. This is more generally trusted (not universally: consider anti-vaxxers for

⁴ See for example Hoggett & Randall (2018).

⁵ Davies’ frame is the Anthropocene: ‘the riddle that the Anthropocene poses is that the human and non-human worlds are no longer ontologically distinct...and yet it is modern science that has established this... Science must abandon its claim to be politically autonomous without this generating a wholesale legitimacy crisis for scientific expertise of the sort that many populists seek to exploit’ (p.x). Perhaps more weight could be given to the point that ‘the Anthropocene’ itself is not a natural kind whose existence simply confronts us a fact to be accepted. It is a highly homogenising and contestable social/political construction (see, for example, Tait 2019).

⁶ For a recent overview of the large literature connecting ecological issues with different understandings of democracy, see Schlosberg et al (2019).

⁷ There are more or less sophisticated and nuanced versions of this thought, of course.

example). His Arendtian explanation of this is the obvious focus of medicine on care for mortal, vulnerable bodies ‘in the sphere of action where human beings appear before one another as unique and irreplaceable’ (p.x). Although also obviously reliant on understanding the human body as a material object obeying scientific principles, medicine is animated by an explicitly value-laden therapeutic culture of care quite unlike the Weberian scientific vocation, from the perspective of which suffering and death are meaningless. The suggestion is that care for all living beings, including nonhuman beings, might become a central focus for populist political concern, with the relevant kinds of expertise ‘modelled on the ideal type of the nurse’ as much as that of the ‘classically modern scientist’ (p.x). The project would be one of constructing a shared political world in which the life, death and action of humans and nonhumans are granted recognition and meaning, rather than subsumed under general laws to enable their techno-scientific administration. To signal the sense of urgency associated both with populism in general and the environmental situation in particular, Davies suggests the mobilising cry: ‘Stop, you’re killing everything!’ (p.x).

There is more to Davies’ analysis and argument than I can mention here and, as he acknowledges, his paper raises many unanswered questions. One concerns the science policy appropriate to such a green populism. Another concerns the values driving it: what do those motivated to forms of green activism actually value and what *should* they value? Presumably this shouldn’t be a matter only of legislation by elite ethical experts. Nor should we expect ‘care for human and nonhuman life’ to be a label for a monolithic value perspective shared by a homogenous ‘green mass’.

In the second paper of this issue Heather Alberro reflects on qualitative empirical research into the views of radical environmental activists (REAs), specifically members of Earth First!, Sea Shepherd and the German Hambacher Forst occupation. Her discussion reinforces the expectation that even assuming a populist care orientation moves beyond simple anthropocentrism, the value perspectives involved, and philosophical underpinnings, will remain diverse. Alberro also provides evidence to the effect that when deeply felt care is confronted with the violence, loss and destruction entailed by anthropogenic mass extinction and climate change it can move via grief and despair into a misanthropic reversal of traditional human/nonhuman hierarchies.

Alberro analyses the views she encounters in terms of how they express the ‘post-anthropocentric paradigm shift’ seemingly required by the ecological crisis. Adding to the

literature on the influence of deep ecology and social ecology on REAs she is concerned to investigate the nuances of their views, for example in the extent of their commitment to biocentrism, sentientism, or to valuing others in proportion to their similarity to humans. ‘Would they extend the same value and consideration, for example, to a red tide algae bloom as they would a humpback whale?’ (p.x). She uses post-anthropocentric, or posthumanist, scholarship to assess their views on such matters. ‘Posthumanism’ here is not the position associated with biogenetic human enhancement; it refers to the rejection of central features of traditional humanism: a view of humans as the centre of the world and of their superiority to all others as grounding a right to reduce them to objects to be subdued and exploited. Alberro reports that many REAs embrace such posthumanism whilst also exhibiting ‘lingering traces of hierarchical valuation’ in uneasy tension with views of the equal inherent value of all life. Partly this is because of an ambivalently expressed view of perceived sentience or intelligence as grounding ethical status (the ambivalence often concerning how far such attributes extend). This is in some tension with posthumanism because it involves the ‘problematic othering’ of beings perceived to lack these favoured characteristics, such that in effect the worth of beings is assessed in terms of similarity to humanity. On the other hand, many also express a commitment to biocentrism but with some ambiguity and disagreement about what counts as ‘life’, and some willingness to value inorganic matter in a way with some affinity to theories such as vital materialism. However, Alberro also reports some hierarchical evaluation in terms of perceived ecological roles or significance. It is in this context that some misanthropic hierarchy-inversion emerges. Some REAs note that unlike many species (e.g., photo-synthesisers, keystone species and pollinators) humanity is not required for the sustained viability of life; that we are wholly dependent on a vast number of other species, but also the Earth would likely benefit from our disappearance or a large decrease in our numbers.

Despite such nuances and disagreements, Alberro emphasises that many REAs sought to deconstruct hierarchical and dualistic classifications and emphasise the ontological inaccuracy of the myth of hyper-separation of human and nonhuman beings. They ‘gesture towards potentially more ethical ways of relating to Earth others’, and especially ‘noteworthy are the depths of REA kinship bonds with other species and the natural world, which compel them “into spaces of absolute sacrifice” in order to ensure the continuity of the latter’ (p.x). Perhaps then they can be regarded as performers of great deeds in the vanguard of a green populism. If so then the potential movement from deeply internalised care for Earth others

through grief at their destruction to misanthropy is itself something to give careful consideration.

In the third paper, Karin Edvardsson Björnberg, Helena Röcklinsberg and Per Sandin consider views that are in some ways the polar opposite of REAs': those of the 'Cornwallists' (Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation), an American Christian conservative group influential in the opposition to greenhouse gas emissions reductions (Björnberg et al., 2020)⁸. They consider several overlapping Cornwallist scripture-based arguments in order to assess the extent these are science-denying or rest on premises rejected by science. Climate denialism comes in several forms (denial of: significant warming; the anthropogenic origin of whatever warming there is; the negative impact on humans and the environment of any such warming; and of any legitimate scientific consensus on climate change). Some Cornwallist arguments are clearly denialist. For example, they run a form of cost/benefit argument (the economic costs of emissions reduction vastly outweighs the benefits and so shouldn't be accept by Christians), and lack of moral relevance argument (there are far more pressing problems for the genuine Christian to focus upon: poverty, abortion, gay marriage, human trafficking...). These entail denial of the scientific consensus on the enormity of the harms associated with climate change including their relationship to poverty and other social ills. However, Björnberg et al also suggest that some Cornwallist arguments do not deny the science as such, so much as rest on premises refuting the *relevance* of science. For example, although the 'omnipotence argument' (as the divine creation of Almighty God the Earth can cope with some climate change even if there is some temporary instability) could be read as denying scientific accounts of the impact of climate change, science cannot rule out the possibility of divine intervention to remedy the situation. This may be a case of subordinating science to faith, rather than denying it outright. Thus Björnberg and her colleagues introduce a new category of denial: '*relevance denial*'. This is most clearly observed in another argument, one based on 'anti-paganism': making the environment, including the climate, the focus of major concern 'serves the creature rather than the creator' (p.x). It conflates transcendent God with His created natural order. We are supposed to be wise stewards of this creation but caring very deeply about it is a step too far that transforms wise stewardship into 'pagan nature-worship'. This is in stark opposition to the care for nature orientation that

⁸ As Björnberg et al emphasise, the Cornwallists are very far from representative of all Christian, including conservative Christian, views on these matters. For further recent discussion of the relation between religious commitments and environmental issues see, for example, Glaab and Fuchs (2018), Uzzell and Räthzell (2019), Wrenn (2019).

Davies hopes might motivate a green populism, of course, as well as the anti-dualist, anti-hierarchical attitudes Alberro finds amongst REAs. Björnberg et al do emphasise that not all Christian evangelists regard climate change mitigation for nature's sake as crossing the Rubicon from wise stewardship to paganism, and that one might hope some of those inclined to take Cornwallist arguments seriously may yet see climate change mitigation as justified. Even so, the 'stewardship but not more' orientation of such views places them at profound odds with those seeking to overcome dualism and hierarchy to care for all living things. This is a clash between what Mary Midgley called 'background myths' regarding our place in the world (Midgley 2003), rather than a difference in scientific methodology or disagreement over this or that empirical fact. The clash is further extended and complicated when one takes on board the point, also emphasised by Björnberg et al, that the Cornwallist arguments have secular, anthropocentric analogues.

Christian conservatives are of the right, but that does not make them fascists of course. Still there is a contrast to be drawn between right-wing ideology and the kind of green populism described by Davies, which it is fair to say is of the left. One might wonder though whether any such populism can resist tendencies, often associated with populism, to 'lurch to the right' via appeals to strong forms of nationalism and hostility to immigrants and outsiders and the treacherous elites who favour them over 'the people'. It would be good then to have a clear view of the ideas constituting ideologies lurking on the far right, especially as they bear upon environmentalism. Balša Lubarda's paper, the fourth in this issue, does valuable work in this regard (Lubarda 2020). His aim is to provide a coherent framework for empirical inquiry into the area, the first move being to reject 'eco-fascism' as an inadequate umbrella term with which to make sense of the range of ideas at play. Instead we should think in terms of 'far right ecologism' (FRE) as an ideal type composed of core ideas that are modified by adjacent ideas within conservative and other right-wing traditions. The ideas are dynamic, in a flux of mutual modification contingent on place and history. We should not be thinking of a fixed, monolithic FRE (presumably this is true of all ideologies). Lubarda argues that the three core components of FRE are: 'naturalism' (in the sense of regarding nature as a blueprint for society, or the nation as a continuation of natural law, and from which non-nationals, including invasive and exotic species, need to be excluded, and 'natural borders' protected); 'spirituality and mysticism' (for example, in Christian countries some form of stewardship of, and conformity to, God's divine creation; but in general, for the far right, 'environmental degradation is a symptom of a "spiritual deficit" induced by modern

“ideologies of progress” (p.x)); ‘organicism’ (in the sense of regarding human communities as ‘forming a common ecosystem or biome with other organic and inorganic elements, from which kinship ties with other creatures are inferred’ (p.x)). The ‘adjacent’ ideas that modify these core FRE notions include populist radical right anthropocentric interpretations of the national importance of local nature or landscape or, on the other hand, extreme veneration of the ‘power and authority’ of nature compared to the puniness of the state. These can produce variations in the kinds of ‘naturalism’ in play, for example. Organicism can often be coloured by economic autarkist notions emphasising the self-dependence and profound connection between ‘land and man’ of those ‘rooted in the soil’, as opposed to nomads and cosmopolitans. Lubarda illustrates his discussion of these clusters of ideas, and their relations, with historical and contemporary examples⁹.

Taken together the first four papers cover many ideas and raise many questions. One question is whether all of the ideas *should* be (allowed to be) raised, at least in public discourse. A common (populist?) complaint at the moment is that a pernicious ‘cancel culture’ has developed in democratic societies in which ‘snowflakes’ seek to silence voices that challenge or upset them. Actually, the legal/constitutional protections in place to safeguard free speech within democratic societies tend to be robust and permissive. Are they *too* permissive though – given the current eco-political moment? In the final paper of the issue Hodgetts and McGravey (2020) consider this question, specifically in relation to climate change denial.

Against the background of recent research showing that 32% of registered voters in the USA believe that climate change either is not happening or is not anthropogenic, Hodgetts and McGravey consider the case for restricting the expression of climate change denial. Their focus is the constitutional and jurisprudential position in the USA, but their argument is generalisable to other democracies. They argue the case is compelling with respect to ‘professional deniers’. These are the ‘merchants of doubt’ paid, by industry or dark money, to purposefully propagate ‘known falsehoods in order to sow doubt into public knowledge, manipulate public sentiments and/or influence government policy’ (p.x). The contrast is with ‘private sceptics’ who, however motivated, express their scepticism as private citizens, albeit in public spaces such as town hall meetings or universities. Why should *professional* denial be allowed? The current permissive position rests on two main arguments. One takes its cue

⁹ See also Katz (2014) for a useful discussion of similarities (and – crucially – dissimilarities) between forms of ecological restoration and Nazi nativism and ideas of ‘Blood and Soil’.

from John Stuart Mill (2005): given the huge utility over time of the pursuit of truth via unrestricted debate within a ‘marketplace of ideas’, speech should be restricted only when it threatens to result in immediate physical harm. The other argument is that, regardless of the pursuit of truth, genuine democratic debate in which all voices are heard requires the fullest protection of free speech. Neither argument is convincing in the case of professional climate denial, Hodgetts and McGravey argue. The Millian argument ignores how immediately pressing are the harms of climate change and how they will intensify the longer it takes to implement significant mitigation policies. There is no time to run an experiment to see which ideas thrive in a ‘free market’, especially one including well-resourced parties intentionally distorting or denying scientifically established facts in order to prevent or delay mitigation. The democracy argument similarly fails because genuine democratic debate presupposes an informed citizenry rather than an intentionally deceived citizenry. However, Hodgetts and McGravey do not advocate constitutional revolution or wholesale abandonment of the norms of free speech. They propose a ‘categorical exception’ be made for professional denialism within an overall system permissive of free speech. Without *equating* professional denialism with such practices they point to analogies with restricting obscenity and child pornography within a generally permissive system: in the latter case the harm to the child does not occur only when the images are made, but is multiplied over time through reproduction of the images; and ‘climate change denial creates a harm that multiplies through time for the youth who are unable to sufficiently combat the problem today’ (p.x).

Could this have popular support? One might think the framing of the issue in terms of the proper scope of a neutral marketplace of ideas is itself objectionable. Maybe the notion of such a marketplace as in itself neutral between competing truth claims should be regarded as a hypocritical smokescreen behind which to enforce partisan views. If denialists claimed this might they have a point if Davies’ Arendtian analysis in the first paper is along the right lines? Not really. Professional denialist appeal to free speech relies on the ‘marketplace’ neutrality associated with science as an epistemic enterprise aimed at the truth yet wants knowingly to deny or obfuscate the findings of that enterprise regarding climate change. This looks like hypocrisy. If we put aside the impartial pursuit of truth and instead justify free speech in terms of its importance either for human flourishing¹⁰ or the functioning of democracy, then it is hard to see why intentionally denying scientific findings regarding serious threats to flourishing, and to the social, economic and ecological stability conditions

¹⁰ As Mill also did (2005, ch.2).

of democracy, should be protected. The claim that it should be looks like a hypocrisy worse than injustice.

Science has faced a steep learning curve with regard to COVID and much remains unclear, despite the international biomedical mobilisation. The basic elements of climate change have been established, and professionally denied, for decades. Given the speed with which at least many governments following the science regarding COVID introduced dramatic measures with general popular support it seems unlikely that they would put up for long with professional denial generously funded by the interests threatened by policies recommended to protect the public in a time of pandemic. Maybe a crucial difference is simply the speed with which COVID appeared and spread worldwide: there was no time for professional denialism to organise (like most governments they were unprepared, despite previous warnings). Although with us now and accelerating, climate change and the scientific consensus regarding it took longer; long enough for professional denialism to develop a powerful hold. All the same, we are all supposed to be following the science now and we are entitled to request this will be done consistently, with appropriate urgency and a view to engaging with the large issues of value, meaning, ethics and justice.

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